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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [LT](#)

SUBJECT: OPPOSITION LEADER CHARGED WITH POSSESSION OF UNLICENCED FIREARMS

REF: MASERU 286; MASERU 265 AND PREVIOUS

11. (U) Summary: The leader of the opposition Basotho National Party (BNP), Major General Justin Lekhanya, and several members of his family appeared before a Maseru district court on July 27, charged with contravening provisions of Lesotho's Internal Security Act. According to local sources, a police search in early July found the Lekhanya family in possession of several unregistered firearms. Following the court appearance, the BNP party released a press statement assailing the action as a smear campaign by the ruling party to bring the country's leading opposition party into disrepute. While it is uncertain whether Lekhanya's case is related to the June killing of a political rival, there is no doubt that the lead-up to legislative elections in 2007 is increasingly volatile. End Summary.

12. (U) BNP President Justin Lekhanya, his wife Sophie, and three immediate family members appeared before Maseru's Magistrate Court on July 27, charged with illegal possession of three pistols, seven shot guns, an Uzi sub-machine gun, and several rounds of ammunition. The charges stemmed from a comprehensive search that Maseru police had conducted on July 2, following the fatal shooting in June of a renegade BNP member (ref X). Lekhanya had turned over numerous weapons during a previous search, which police later returned to him. Authorities released Lekhanya and his family after paying a bail deposit of approximately \$65.00 each. No court date has been set.

13. (U) In a July 29 press release, the BNP confirmed that criminal charges had been filed against Lekhanya. The BNP argued, however, that all of Lekhanya's weapons were fully licensed and that he would be vindicated in court. The party alleged that the charges were part of a political smear campaign, intimating that the governing party, the Lesotho Congress for Democracy (LCD), was posturing in advance of general elections next year. The BNP complained that after the alleged shooting in January of Foreign Minister Monyane Moleleki (a member of the LCD), which he had attributed to elements within his own party, the police had failed to mount a similar crackdown against LCD leaders.

14. (U) The BNP appealed to its members and to the general public not to let political tactics dissuade them from participating in 2007 general elections and "ensuring a democratic change of government." The party also claimed that the legal action targeting Lekhanya would not appease public dissatisfaction over a reported corruption case in which government officials allegedly obtained luxury sedans at below-market prices.

15. (SBU) Comment: It is not surprising that Lekhanya's court case has political dimensions. He is a shrewd and veteran politician who, as a military commander, led Lesotho's military regime in the 1990s. His BNP party holds only 17 percent of the parliament and does not pose a serious electoral threat, but may use these and other legal cases to refute election results next year. The firearms-related charges against him raise many

eyebrows in Maseru, where illegal guns flow freely. Nonetheless, the apparent assassination in June of a rival BNP member further muddied the already murky waters of Lesotho politics. It is uncertain whether Lekhanya's case is related to that political killing. It is more certain, however, that the pre-election environment is increasingly volatile. End Comment.

MURPHY